

# The Inspiration of **India** in Current **American**

# Art

## Contemporary Responses and Hybrid Forms

By KATHRYN MYERS

Americans have had a rich history of engagement with Indian artistic, cultural, philosophic and spiritual traditions since at least the mid-19th century, when notable American transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau found common threads of thought in the non-dualistic nature of Indian spirituality.

Interest in India has continued to broaden and deepen since then. Significant museum collections were developed throughout the United States by seminal figures such as Ananda Coomaraswamy, who became the keeper of Indian art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1917. They were reinforced by the introduction of university programs in Indian philosophy, religion and art and major exhibitions such as the Festival of India, which brought Indian art, music, dance and film to museums all over the United States in 1985.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries artists who learned Eastern practices of

expanding the consciousness felt that abstraction was the most effective way to express transcendent levels of reality. Tantra, an esoteric system of ritual belief using abstract diagrams such as the yantra and mandala, became an important influence.

While some artists borrow from the formal qualities of Indian art, others as diverse in style and intent as the abstract expressionist painter Ad Reinhardt and the contemporary video artist Bill Viola create works based on philosophical and spiritual aspects of Indian art and ritual practices.

Art that is made when diverse cultures influence each other provides rich experiences of exchange, the creation of hybrid forms and the discovery of new processes and symbols. Effectively balancing and negotiating those relationships remains a challenge. In his book *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*, Roger Lipsey comments that artists drawn to ancient forms and techniques often must struggle to reenact them without ceasing to be of

their own time. New Delhi-based American artist and curator Peter Nagy warns of “the dangers of exploitation...and essentialist misinterpretations with any encounter between two cultures.” While some are wary of cultural theft or superficial understanding, others encourage artistic efforts of hybridity as examples of global interest and awareness. In his seminal book *Orientalism*, Edward Said wrote of the damaging and misguided efforts that can be the lasting result of even the most well-intentioned engagement with other cultures, but he also continued to have faith in “the ongoing and literally unending process of emancipation and enlightenment that frames and gives direction to the intellectual vocation.”

The Fulbright Foundation, funded by the U.S. State Department, is one of the few granting agencies that supports the creative projects and research of individual artists and has directly helped Indian and American artists share influences and techniques, as well as lasting friendships.

Five contemporary artists, Michael



Works by Michael Peter Cain in collaboration with Guard Kacera, Om Prakosh Kacera, Rajesh Kacera, Papou Vishwakarman and Rakesh Aggrawal.

**sEVENlEVElsOVEn**, (left)  
digital simulation of work in progress, patinas and flock on copper repoussé,  
29 cm x 30 cm x 13 cm, 2005.

**becOMingsoURcesEEsOut**, (below)  
patina on brass repoussé,  
cast brass and bronze.  
150 cm x 60 cm x 60 cm, 2001.

Peter Cain, Charlotte Cain, Nancy Bowen, James A. Cook and Robert Kirschbaum, continue a tradition of artistic and intellectual engagement with India, providing prime examples of the diverse and highly individual ways in which American artists have responded to India.

Seeking models for artistic practice at the beginning of their careers in the 1960s, Michael Peter Cain, then a graduate student in painting at Yale University, and his wife, Charlotte, were inspired to learn more about Indian art and culture by the writings of Coomaraswamy, the lives of Indian religious leaders and concerts of classical Indian music. Coomaraswamy's descriptions of the aesthetic experience as "twin brother" to the experience of enlightenment motivated the Cains to explore creating art that expressed and evoked pure consciousness. This aspiration gained momentum with the 1968 release of Ajit Mookerjee's *Tantra Art*, which reproduces a range of Indian artworks mapping the cosmic into the everyday world as a spiritual practice. The Cains traveled to India in 1970 for a

meditation course and returned many times. In 1996 and 1997, when Michael was on a Fulbright fellowship, they spent 17 months in India, Michael studying and practicing the "living traditions" of Hindu sculpture while Charlotte worked with traditional miniature painters in Chamba and Jaipur.

Michael was particularly interested in the process and function of Hindu idols or "murthies." He worked with traditional sculptors in Chamba, Swami Malai, and most recently Varanasi, creating works that juxtapose Western minimalist forms with mixed references to aspects of India's sacred arts. He became fascinated with traditional Indic and Indo-Islamic ornaments that juxtapose images of water, mythic animals and intertwining vegetation to suggest nature in harmonious abundance and evoke principles of cosmic manifestation. Repoussé, the art of hammering sheet metal into three-dimensional forms, a largely forgotten technique in the West, has become his chosen method for scaling relief patterns into geometric volumes such as the sphere



and cone. His elemental forms reference primary abstraction of 1960s minimalist art as well as the geometry of tantric diagrams and early European alchemical and cosmological symbols. Working with as many as 12 specialized artisans on each sculpture, Cain and his collaborators configure ornamental motifs to enliven the surfaces of each sculpture as in *becOMingsoURcesEEsOut*. Cain's most recent work-in-progress, *sEVENlEVElsOVEn*, uses a fragment to suggest the whole, letting an exposed inner surface present relief imagery appropriated from the mane of a bronze leonine beast in Varanasi's Durga temple.



**Herod's Gate,**  
*Robert Kirschbaum,*  
*oil on wood,*  
*41 cm x 38 cm.*

The art made when diverse cultures influence each other provides hybrid forms, new processes and symbols.



**American Book of the Dead:  
The Mechanics of Prayer,**  
*James A. Cook,*  
*kinetic, interactive piece, 2001.*



**Love Loves Love,**  
*Charlotte Cain,*  
*gouache on paper,*  
*30 cm x 22 cm, 2003.*

“I like to think that the tiny bridges that our works create convey local image making into emerging world culture and thereby counteract the leveling tendencies of globalism,” says Cain.

Working with master miniature painters Vijay Sharma of Himachal Pradesh and Bannu Sharma of Rajasthan, Charlotte Cain, who has been awarded a Fulbright fellowship for 2006, developed painting techniques suited to images that can evoke “inner silence and a feeling of the infinite.” She feels her use of miniature painting techniques, particularly the layering of minute brush strokes, has enabled her to focus consciousness at the point of contact between the tip of the brush and the paper to achieve “a flow of awareness from the heart through the hand into the painted surface.”

Many of Cain’s gouache paintings on



**Wonder,**  
Nancy Bowen,  
plaster, steel, clay and silver leaf,  
226 cm x 191 cm x 84 cm, 1999-2000.

Boundaries are less strong between functional objects and art in India.

antique Indian paper reenact ritual images, especially elaborate linear forms called *kolams* or *rangoli* that Indian women make on their thresholds each day before the sun rises, forms in which the lines “turn back on themselves endlessly,” evoking a sense of the infinite. She has also drawn freely from the intuitive ritual geometries of tantra art. One can see ritual imagery in pieces such as *Kolam #7*. Recreating folk images like *kolams* and tantric diagrams with classical miniature painting techniques allows her to express her tactile love of muted, precisely balanced and articulated painterly surfaces that resonate with a sense of the infinite. Sometimes, however, her process bypasses appropriated ritual imagery to create new designs that focus attention on the layering of delicate forms and colors, as in her recent piece titled *Love Loves Love*.

The Cains are emeritus professors at Maharishi University of Management in Fairfield, Iowa.

Sculptor Nancy Bowen finds India a vital source for contemporary sculptors. On her first visit several years ago she saw the Ajanta caves, the erotic temple sculpture of Khajuraho and the stone works of Mahabalipuram. As much as she was deeply moved by these historical works, she was even more inspired by the profusion of objects she encountered in the streets, village markets and roadside shrines, where the boundaries the West has constructed between functional objects and art, the sacred and secular, ritual and work did not seem to be so strong. She formed a deep appreciation for the care brought to the making of objects both sublime and mundane and encountered contemporary sculptors who continued to find validity in ancient forms while responding to the complexities of contemporary life.

Returning to her studio in Brooklyn, New York, with a renewed sense of freedom to combine disparate materials, and disparate visual vocabularies, Bowen began combining decorative structural, figurative and abstract elements while using the language of applied arts such as pottery and furniture. In *Wonder*, based on the forms of the chakras, an ancient

system of anatomical knowledge, she sensed a correlation in her process of coating the form in a repetitive manner with silver leaf and the daily worship of the Jain sculptures she observed at Ranakpur. Regarding her works as contemplative objects, Bowen feels they “weave a decorative impulse into physical interpretations of various systems ranging from anatomy to Eastern religion,” evoking forms that seem “unnamable, simultaneously strange and familiar.” Bowen is professor of sculpture at the State University of New York in Purchase.

A deep respect for the creation, function and reception of sacred objects and structures informs the research and work of sculptor James Cook, who since 1980 has studied the creative practices of traditional artists and artisans in India and Nepal. During his initial stay in South India, a number of intriguing, unfamiliar experiences stimulated his inquiry into the traditional formulation of sacred images and temples. His complex multi-media works attempt to parallel as well as recognize essential differences between the traditional South Asian artist, icon and worshipper, and the artist, work of art and spectator in the West. He believes the iconic form realized through Hindu philosophy is able to penetrate to more “essential levels of being,” and is inspired by reading the *Vastusutras*, where it is maintained that an image or form can be “apprehended at one and the same time by all the organic and intellectual faculties without having to be mentally connected through a sequence of impressions.”

Cook’s recognition of the difficulty the Westerner faces in comprehending form in this all-encompassing manner is exemplified in an interactive sculptural installation, *American Book of the Dead: Mechanics of Prayer*. In this piece the visitor spins a pulley wheel using a foot treadle, the spinning wheel activating a long pulley rope. At the other end the rope activates smaller pulleys and linkages with an old cast iron sewing machine table, causing a gold-leafed steel rod to slide up and down. A white hand mechanically arcs back and forth over the



**Plenty,**  
Nancy Bowen,  
resin, glass, wax, steel and mixed media,  
198 cm x 140 cm x 140 cm, 2002.

table in front of a small framed mirror, forming the gesture of prayer with its own reflection. As the rod reaches the peak of its upward motion, it grazes another rod, shorting out an electrical circuit and causing a small shower of sparks above the prayer machine. For Cook, this piece and many others serve as “an absurd critique addressing the difficulties of bridging to esoteric experiences relying exclusively upon rational strategies and empty, mechanically performed rituals.” While his work at times demonstrates keen frustration, the depth and range of his multi-level investigation of Indian art, spirituality and philosophy are continually nourishing and rewarding. Cook is a professor of sculpture at the University of Arizona in Tucson and held a Fulbright fellowship to India in 1996.

Robert Kirschbaum’s life and work have been enriched by Indian art and culture and led him to a deeper understanding of his own Judaic heritage. “While the dynamic of artistic practice in the West has thrust more secular pursuits upon the contemporary artist, many of us are seeking to reclaim and reinterpret the primary spiritual foundation of our heritage as artists and artisans.” Sacred

space in Judaic and Indian culture were a central focus of Kirschbaum’s prints, drawings and sculpture well before a Fulbright fellowship in 1996 gave him an opportunity to experience a wide variety of materials and forms used to visualize the divine in diverse regions of India from Tamil Nadu to Ladakh. A syncretic response was further inspired by his visits to the Bene Israel community of Mumbai and their sacred sites along the Konkan coast. Extensive research on the structures of the Jewish temple, Hindu fire altar and Tibetan chorten revealed fascinating similarities.

Drawing from Judaic and Indian abstract ritual art such as the yantra, mandala and cabala as well as from the Judaic concept of shelters for the spirit and models for the heavens, body, portal, altar and temple, Kirschbaum effectively layers his architectural shapes and diagrammatic forms with flat saturated color informed by Indian posters, signs, popular prints and textiles. His specific interest in the yantra, which began in 1978 and has lately dominated, led him to create sacred diagrams as the underpinnings for his *Portal and Altar Series*. In these prints and paintings, the doorway is used as a metaphor for spiritual passage. In a group of large-scale etchings called *Squaring the Mount*, Kirschbaum has delineated the geometric transformation of Jerusalem’s Temple Mount and the various historical versions of the temple from quadrilateral to square and from square to circle, once again “squaring the circle” as a means of integrating the spiritual and the material, the earth and the cosmos, establishing a ritual dimension in his work. Echoing the repetitive process of *rangoli* or *kolam*, Kirschbaum’s drawings can be recreated in the same manner again and again. Kirschbaum is professor of fine art at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, where he teaches printmaking and drawing. □

**About the Author:** Kathryn Myers is a painter and professor of art at the University of Connecticut in Storrs and held a Fulbright fellowship to India in 2002. The topic of this paper was presented as a panel discussion for the annual College Art Association conference in Atlanta, Georgia, in 2005.